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Did the Castro Plot Backfire?

The late Robert Kennedy was tormented by the terrible thought, according to intimates, that he may have helped trigger the assassination of his brother.

We raised this possibility in January 1971, when we first revealed that the CIA had plotted to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. It has taken us 4½ years to get the rest of the story.

Loyal associates of Robert Kennedy, rushing to defend his memory, have sworn that he knew nothing about the assassination attempts and, contradictorily, that he put a stop to them. Both accounts are incorrect, according to sources with an intimate knowledge of the events.

Not only was he fully aware of the CIA's attempts to kill Castro, but after President Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas, Robert was devastated by the possibility that the CIA plot may have backfired against his brother.

The preparations to knock off Castro began during the last months of the Eisenhower administration as part of the Bay of Pigs planning. President Kennedy, who inherited the fiasco, swore to friends afterward that he would like "to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds."

Instead, he appointed his brother, Robert, to oversee the CIA, with instructions to shake it up. Characteristically, Robert began investigating the undercover operations from top to bottom. His purpose was to prevent another Bay of Pigs.

He became fascinated, say our sources, with the CIA's covert activities. Eagerly, he pursued the details down through the lower levels. As one source put it, "He was like a wide-eyed schoolboy."

In the process, he learned about the continuing effort to eliminate Castro, an operation known inside the CIA as the "executive action plan." In fact, Robert took a special interest in the activities against Castro. One insider, former Deputy Defense Secretary Roswell Gilpatric, told us the focus "on the Cuban situation" was intensified in 1961 at Robert Kennedy's "insistence."

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The President eventually put Robert in charge of a counter-insurgency committee, called the Special Group, which concentrated upon harassing Castro. One member, former CIA chief John McCone, acknowledged that the group had "directed mischievous things against Castro like infiltrating saboteurs, blowing up bridges and carrying on general confusion."

McCone insisted, however, that "the group at no time gave any consideration to any assassination plot." We have established that the "executive action plan" was directed by William Harvey, the CIA operative whom we linked to the assassination plot in our original 1971 story. We have also learned that he reported to the late Desmond Fitzgerald in CIA headquarters. We have been unable, however, to identify the next link in the chain of command.

Nevertheless, wholly reliable sources insist that Robert Kennedy knew about the plot against Castro and did nothing to stop it. The intended target, Fidel Castro, also knew about it. One assassination squad reportedly was apprehended on a Havana roof top within range of Castro's movements, about March 1, 1963.

The Cuban premier, in an interview with Associated Press correspondent Daniel Harker the following September, warned that U.S. leaders would find themselves in danger if they attempted to do away with Cuban leaders.

"United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe," Castro told Harker.

Two months later, President Kennedy was shot down in the streets of Dallas. The accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, had been active in the pro-Castro movement and had traveled to Mexico to visit the Cuban embassy a few weeks earlier.

The first person to reach Robert Kennedy's side after the shooting was CIA director John McCone, who remained alone with Robert at his McLean, Va., home for nearly three hours. All others, including Robert's priest, were turned away. But McCone swore to us that Castro's name was never mentioned during the agonizing three hours.

Other sources say that Robert, deeply despondent, went into semi-seclusion for the next few days. Although he bottled up his feelings, they knew him and understood the circumstances well enough to realize he blamed himself for his brother's death. There was little doubt, they say, that he believed the CIA's attempts against Castro put into motion the forces that brought about his brother's martyrdom.

On January 18, 1971, we reported: "Among those privy to the CIA conspiracy, there is still a nagging suspicion—unsupported by the Warren Commission's findings—that Castro became aware of the U.S. plot upon his life and somehow recruited Oswald to retaliate against President Kennedy."

It has now been disclosed that the Warren Commission was told nothing about the CIA's plot to kill Castro even though the late Allen Dulles, the CIA chief who initiated the plot, sat on the commission.

According to the final report, the commission investigated "literally dozens of allegations of a conspiratorial contact between Oswald and the Cuban government" but found no substance to any of them.

The Cuban premier himself, in an interview with Frank Mankiewicz and Kirby Jones, emphatically denied having anything to do with the Kennedy assassination.

"It is . . . very interesting that this man Oswald, who was involved in the assassination, traveled to Mexico a few months prior to the assassination and applied for a permit at the Cuban embassy to travel to Cuba, and he was not given the permit," said Castro.

"But I ask myself why would a man who commits such an act try to come here. Sometimes we ask ourselves if someone did not wish to involve Cuba in this, because I am under the impression that Kennedy's assassination was organized by reactionaries in the United States and that it was all a result of a conspiracy . . . We have never believed in carrying out this type of activity of assassination of adversaries."

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